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SUBJECT: BERRI CHARACTERIZES GOVERNMENT DELAY AS "SILLY"
CHILD'S PLAY

REF: BEIRUT 1153

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri characterized the ongoing delay in cabinet formation as "silly" in an October 28 meeting with the Ambassador. He claimed that the negotiations between Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri and Christian opposition leader Michel Aoun had devolved into a "game between small boys." Berri claimed that he and President Michel Sleiman were working together to pressure the parties to arrive at a solution. Nader Hariri confirmed to polchief in a separate meeting the same day, however, that no agreement has been reached on cabinet lineup. It is possible that Aoun could end up with the telecommunications ministry and Aoun's son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, as minister in a ministry besides telecommunications, Nader advised. The Ambassador outlined to Berri U.S. concern over the previous evening's rocket launch from south Lebanon into Israel. Berri declared that he needed a government not only for the proper functioning of the Parliament, but also so that Lebanon could stem the increasing number of security incidents in the south. He encouraged the U.S. to continue with its programmatic objectives to enhance the capacity of the Lebanese parliament and resource center and welcomed the upcoming visit by Codel Price. End summary.

BERRI: "I NEED A GOVERNMENT"

¶2. (C) Berri characterized the ongoing disagreements over government formation between Hariri and Aoun as "silly" and "a game between small boys" when met with the Ambassador on October 28. Berri, who claimed that two months ago the major obstacles to cabinet formation were objections from Egypt, Syria and the U.S., said that today there is no reason for delay. The Ambassador refuted Berri's accusation of U.S. hindrance, but agreed that it was important that a government be formed as soon as possible, a government that would work actively to promote stability in the region. As head of the parliament, Berri unequivocally stated that, "I need a government" for the parliament to become fully functional and handle its legislative responsibilities because every law requires the signature of the president, prime minister, and the relevant cabinet minister whose portfolio the law falls under. Berri relayed that he had planned an intervention for later the same evening (on the margins of a state dinner hosted by the president) to pressure Hariri to come to an agreement with Aoun expeditiously. However, Sleiman telephoned Berri during our meeting and advised him that

Hariri would not, after all, be attending the dinner. Instead, Berri told us, he and Sleiman would strategize one-on-one.

¶13. (C) One day after Berri had announced the second postponement of parliamentary committee elections, he relayed that the vote for committees could not go forward because a quorum had not been present. He claimed majority leader Hariri had requested the delay in the formation of committees, advising Berri prior to the session that the majority parliamentarians would be instructed not to attend. However, MP Dory Chamoun (Maronite from the Chouf district), "accidentally showed up." When the assembled media questioned Chamoun as to why he had shown up, he said he "had not received the message."

NADER HARIRI SAYS NO DEAL YET

¶14. (C) Although both Aoun and Hariri have proposed various cabinet lineups for the FPM to each other, no agreement has been reached, Nader Hariri, advisor to the PM-designate, told polchief on October 28. Hariri's camp is convinced that the opposition is trying a two-pronged approach in its negotiations: obtain a "security-related" portfolio such as telecommunications or justice while simultaneously arousing tension between Hariri and his partners Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea (both hold portfolios that Aoun is demanding). Nader Hariri underscored that the majority alliance is strong, and the PM-designate will not surrender the justice ministry because he refused to risk creating any problems for the Special Tribunal.

¶15. (C) Hariri's camp believes that the value of the telecom ministry is rising daily, so "if we sell it for everything we want, it will be a big win for March 14," Hariri reasoned. While there is no agreement yet, opposition figure Suleiman Frangieh's recent positive statements about the negotiations are a clear sign that Syria wants to move ahead, he added. Syrian pressure on the opposition is growing, Hariri believed, in light of the Saudi-Syrian rapprochement and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's scheduled trip to Paris in the middle of November. "He wants to take one item off the agenda," Hariri joked. A significant rotation of ministries, as suggested by Berri, is out of the question because "we're beyond that," but the cabinet cannot return with each party holding the same portfolios as before since "otherwise we should just keep Fouad Siniora, too," he opined. If the telecom ministry is given to Aoun in the end, he will be offered three "minor" ministries as well (most likely the ministry of the displaced, the ministry of social affairs, and a third to be decided), Hariri revealed. This would be on the condition that Gebran Bassil not return as telecom minister, "to call their bluff."

UNSCR 1701 VIOLATIONS DUE TO "OUTSIDERS"

¶16. (C) The Ambassador expressed to Berri U.S. concerns over continued security incidents in the south that violate UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1701. As expected, Berri immediately urged that the U.S. also hold Israel accountable for its violations "everyday over Lebanese land, air, and sea." Berri also theorized that the individuals or group behind the October 28 rocket attack from Houla (reftel) were Sunni extremists most likely not from the area. These "outsiders," he alleged, sought to launch their rockets from beside the home of a Hizballah official to provoke a response from Israel, thus creating an Israel-Hizballah conflict. Berri said he firmly believed that "neither the Lebanese nor Hizballah" were behind the incident. Houla and other incidents are the reason why "we need a government very quickly...to stop this," Berri stressed. In the meeting and in her statements to the press afterward, the Ambassador registered U.S. condemnation of the previous evening's rocket launch from south Lebanon into Israel.

¶7. (SBU) Speaker Berri explained that the legislative and management functions of the parliament are separate. A government is necessary for the legislative side, but in the meantime the management side can continue its work, he said. He welcomed news of the November 9-10 visit of Codel Price to discuss parliamentary assistance and cooperation. Berri also encouraged USAID to move forward with its parliamentary resource center program through a grant to the State University of New York's Center for International Development (SUNY/CID). The Ambassador advised Berri that the SUNY/CID project was projected to begin its work soon.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: "The outlook for today," as Berri said, does not portend immediate progress on cabinet formation. The cooperation between Berri and President Sleiman is nonetheless notable and could have a positive impact on Hariri. It is still unclear how much pressure the two can actually assert on Michel Aoun since both men's relationship with Aoun is fragile. The report from Hariri's camp shows a gradual movement toward accepting to Aoun's initial demands for Bassil's return and for the telecommunications ministry, albeit with face-saving conditions.

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